Stories of Home

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Stories of Home

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Summary

No one can properly remember how it had started, just that they had done it for most of their lives as knights together. Stories around the fire as children, chilling tales from their homeland, adjusted and amended with laughter and jibes by those from a different region. When the stories had run out, and when the amendments were so tangled no one knew quite the wording for its original, the stories of home started.

The origin story, of sorts, for Tristan, his bird, his exotic armor and his sexy tattoos.

Notes

Our first tryst in this pairing, and we quite like it! More to come, most definitely!

Part of Tristhad Week run on Tumblr.

A gift, too, for the lovely GuilliverJ, who asked for our interpretation of Tristan's story. We hope you like it, bb, we drew inspiration from the eagle hunters in Mongolia, and are rather pleased with the result. The research was so much fun!

See the end of the work for more notes

No one can properly remember how it had started, just that they had done it for most of their lives as knights together. Stories around the fire as children, chilling tales from their homeland, adjusted and amended with laughter and jibes by those from a different region. When the stories had run out, and when the amendments were so tangled no one knew quite the wording for its original, the stories of home started.

At the time, the boys had just started to grow to adolescence, no longer the tiny and lanky things that had been hauled in thick furs and heavy blankets from their homes, now young men with lean muscle and strong legs from riding.

At the time, there had been twelve of them.

Tristan remembers the first story told, because it had been the first he understood. Having been taken from lands not his own at a time he was not meant to be there, he had nothing but the horse he had ridden on and his bird, a small cloak to cover them all as he had been led away. No language, no possessions, nothing to give at all but silence and wide, brown eyes.

But this story he remembers, Bors standing on the log he'd shared with Dagonet and gesticulating wildly in his enthusiastic talk of home.

Home.

Tristan wonders if any of them at all remember what home is, or if it is like their scary tales, where version and regions and times mixed in to taint and shift memory around until the picture was so different it no longer resembled their home at all.

He wonders, but he doesn't voice.

He rarely voices.

And it is Bors, again, who tells a story this evening, but his version of home has changed with the passing of time and the addition year by year of another child. Home becomes more populated for him, it becomes busier and sillier and the nights he tells stories they know not to drink as he does, for fear of finding their wine up their nose from laughing so hard at his words.

"I don't know what to do with them all," he's saying. "I have a whole blasted village to care for."

"And you the idiot of it," Lancelot interjects, to amused jeers and whistling, and an impassive gaze from the story's narrator.

"Most times," Bors agrees, to another round of laughter. "But," he adds, dramatically pointing a finger at the man who interrupted, "not this time. So I tell Quintus - I'm drunk, mind you -"

"Anyone surprised?" Galahad adds, leaning forward over crossed legs to survey the men who watch in amusement. "No one? I, for one, am shocked -"

“It’s like being at home, I can’t get a bloody word in edgewise. So I tell him, ‘Your mother doesn’t want you to know this, but you’re actually a sheepdog’.”

Tristan glances up from the whittling in his hands, as stunned, delighted silence falls over the fire.

“Right,” Bors continues, seizing the rare silence. “And he looks at me like I’m stupid, which isn’t far off, but I go on about yeah, your mum’s your mum but her mum was a sheepdog, you know. And he’s still looking at me crossways but he asks, what about the others? The others, I tell him, careful to keep my voice low so his mum doesn’t *actually* hear - the others are all sheep.”

“You *what*?” Lancelot exclaims, as laughter finally breaks amongst the men.

“Next thing you know, he’s barking at them if they step out of line, snapping at them to keep them from running all over the place, and she can’t figure out what’s gotten into him. Told her a bit of sheepdog.”

Tristan snorts, as close to a genuine full-belly laugh the man gets, really, as he watches. Gawain is barely holding himself up against his brother, and Arthur laughs into his cup before hazarding a sip and managing to swallow.

They are always good, these firelight stories, late into the night when one doesn’t want to keep watch and the others can’t sleep. It is comfortable, close. And perhaps once they go their separate ways, more will meet by another fire, and talk of their times here, as home. Those that have found this to be their only one, since they cannot remember their first, or no longer have it.

Above them, the stars spill like seeds from a pomegranate across the dark cloth of the sky. It is cold but not enough to drive them to their tents just yet. They have several days more of riding before they reach the wall, several days more of stars and rolling hills and pawing horses.

Tristan watches the sky and tilts his head only when he sees a shadow pass over some stars and reveal them again. Then he whistles, a short and sharp thing through pursed lips and holds out his arm. The others ease from laughter, some more successfully than others - Galahad is still snorting into his palm, pink-cheeked and childish - and they watch Tristan’s falcon return to him.

“How you see that bird is beyond me,” Arthur tells him, taking another drink of his wine and licking his lips. “It comes and goes without call or warning, and you set it free every day we ride.”

“I raised her,” Tristan replies, stroking the bird’s feathers with gentle knuckles before reaching to offer her a piece of meat he had saved from dinner, letting the bird eat from his fingers, fearless of them being nipped. “This is her home, until she finds another one.”

“You’d let her go?”

“Of course,” answers Tristan. His hair, lank and long, hides much of his expression, but what can be seen is a steadfast contentment. The man is calm, put mildly, unshakeable by either distress or happiness, and no more so than when his girl returns to him.

“Why?” Ventures Galahad. “If you trained her -”

“I did not train her. I said I raised her.” Tristan shifts, tucking a leg underneath himself, showing only a slight discomfort at the attention. He allows his falcon to the ground beside him, talons stretched into the soft soil as she seeks another morsel and of course, receives it. “What she does, is her own skill. She only lends it to me. We trust each other after so long. I’ve known her since her first feathers began to unfurl.”

“I remember that,” Bors nods. “Dagonet found that scrawny thing somewhere in the rocks. How he does it, I can’t fathom.”

“You had just lost your eagle,” Dagonet adds, always quiet, always soft-spoken, always a mystery to them all - how he and Bors were so close, considering they were opposite sides of a coin.

“I did not lose her. Her, I also let go,” Tristan amends, sitting back to take up his whittling again as his bird walks by the fire, spreads her wings enough to perch herself on the log at Tristan’s side. “She and I had had our years together, it is custom to set them free.”

“Seems almost counter-productive, doesn’t it?” Gawain asks, setting his feet to the ground, hands clasped between his knees. “To train - raise -” He holds his hands up in apology, though Tristan’s expression had not changed at all from the calm serenity of before. “To raise these birds and then let them go after eight years of trust and work together.”

There is quiet, then, as everyone waits for an answer, and Tristan raises his eyes to regard his friends, his brothers, before allowing another soft snort of resignation and setting his work aside again.

It had taken years for Tristan to contribute to conversation at all, and it had taken Arthur a lot of patience and a long time proving his friendship to realize it was simply because Tristan did not speak their language enough to understand it or wield it. Though of course, even after he did, he did not prove to be particularly verbose either.

Perhaps that's why his stories are always wheedled out of him around the fire. He does not easily offer them, and when he does tell them, he does so eloquently and beautifully. He was the only of the knights who had been taken on accident, his family traveling through the village at the time on their way home to Chaulting. They had no language to take Tristan back without bloodshed, so he had gone.

“It is how we ensure our eagles have strong young of their own,” Tristan explains. “To continue on the generations, as ours do alongside them.”

"Wise," Arthur remarks, and Tristan allows a smile to flicker in response.

"I see no other option but," he agrees, brows drawing inward as he peels off a long strip of wood. "What else? A life of servitude? Captivity? No," Tristan says, with a shake of his head. "Like us. They do their work, they accept it with good spirits, and then are rewarded freedom - to seek mates and settle, to do as they please. That is the agreement. They know, don't you, girl?"

Tristan lifts a hand, stroking beneath his falcon's beak. He catches the hook of it in his fingers and gives a little shake, gazing on her with irrepressible fondness. The men are quiet, absorbing his words - perhaps the most he's ever spoken at once - and it is Galahad who leans forward first, to breach the silence.

"What is her name?"

The bird had always been ‘the bird’ to them, familiar enough that they knew to look for her and ask about her, familiar enough that she allowed them near, only a few to touch, and only if Tristan was near.

“*Temtsel*,” Tristan replies. He clicks his tongue when the bird turns to him and parts her beak on a quiet cry, wings raised before she folds them again. Tristan says more, coos at her in his native tongue before turning away again, letting her settle as she pleases, shifting from foot to foot on the log and turning to warm herself by the fire, as they all are.

“'Fight',” Tristan translates, a smile curving his lip before he blinks and clears his expression to one of general warmth.

“Not a coddler, huh Tristan?” Bors laughs, takes up another cup of wine to drink.

“From the man who numbers his children, Bors, I will take no advice from you.” Tristan’s eyes are bright, delighted, as Bors chokes and the rest of the men laugh, slapping Tristan on the shoulder or Bors on the back to help him breathe again.

“I’ll have you know -”

“Oh, we know, Bors,” Lancelot grins. “You make sure we all know far too much.”

“Coming from you, that’s a bloody laugh.”

It is, and the men lose themselves in it again, loud laughter to fill the empty space they’ve found and carved out as their own for tonight, at least, with only star-speckled sky and dense forest in the distance. It is strangely comfortable, and Gawain lifts a hand to gather their attention, eager to talk about his brother, who snorts enough to send a stray curl askew into his hair. Galahad’s attention lingers, instead, on the falcon settled low over her deadly feet, feathers ruffled content as a hen rather than a wild thing that brings back bloodied rabbits that Tristan happily cooks for them both.

The man himself is equally relaxed, the attention now shifted from him to the stories that twine endless from one to the next, same as the fire carries crackling from tinder to tinder. Dry sticks feed it, to keep its heat alive, and alcohol maintains the gentle warmth of their

camaraderie. But he feels eyes on him, shining with mead, cheeks darkened by that as much as the campfire, and Tristan lifts his own to meet them, silent.

“We had dogs,” Galahad tells him. “A lot of them. Working dogs, mostly, but not only that.” He draws up a knee and folds his arms over it, resting his cheek there. “We raised them from pups, too.”

"Companions?" Tristan asks.

"Friends."

There is a brief wrinkling at the corner of Tristan's eyes. There has always been something about each of his friends, something particular, unique to them alone. Lancelot was a fighter, a show-off but one with excellent skill to be proud of. Arthur - a diplomat, clever and quick. Bors, despite his appearance and every word shouted to the contrary, a caretaker, protective and kind. Dagonet had his empathy and unparalleled understanding of everything around them. Gawain had bravery, recklessness and insight.

And Galahad, their youngest, was curious. Always curious.

He had been the one, after Arthur, to talk to Tristan the most, about anything and nothing at all, uncaring, seemingly, for the older boy’s silence.

"Was it a rite of passage," Tristan asks, "to train them to your hand?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "Less that than another bit of work our father wouldn't have to do. But the first hunt -"

"You hunted with them?"

"Of course," Galahad exclaims, mildly, feigning offense before settling again. "It was a momentous occasion - taking out the dogs you know like siblings, depending on the other to do their best -"

"What did you hunt?"

"Foxes, mostly." Galahad lifts a hand, finger outstretched as if to prod the dozing bird, but her strange eyes open sideways and she tilts her head. He stops, grinning, and returns his hand to his own keeping.

"The same then," Tristan adds. "But with our eagles -"

Galahad's eyes flare in surprise. "To hunt foxes?"

Tristan blinks. Amusement draws up his eyes and he sets aside the knife and bit of wood to instead spread his hands tall, one up near his eyes, the other near the ground. He forms the size of the bird, enormous creatures, watching with pleasure as Galahad’s eyes grow larger still.

“They’re that big?” Galahad asks, awed.

“Yes. We used to joke that it was really all a way to make us build muscle, holding a bird nearly as tall as yourself on your arm.” He glances to the falcon at his side, her eyes closed again, fluffed fat from the fire’s warmth. A gentle finger strokes the feathers beneath her beak, and Tristan mutters fondly, “You’re too small, you see? You should eat more.”

Galahad can almost remember, six years ago, now, before Tristan spent night and day taking care of the chick Dagonet had found him, a huge shadow of a creature he used to carry with him. He had been too quiet, then, to explain much about her, beyond stating her name and making his affection for her obvious.

It is amazing the things memory erases or replaces.

Galahad wonders, absently, how much of home he truly remembers properly. His parents' faces are a blur, a smile there, light eyes, a blink and both are gone. But his dogs he thinks he will never forget, shaggy and long-limbed things, like wolves in their strength and prowess.

"Was your first hunt successful?" Tristan’s voice pulls him from his reverie and Galahad blinks, made slow and sleepy by mead, by the fire and good company.

“No,” he answers, with a sheepish grin. “I don’t think the dogs or I realized how fast foxes really are, until all we saw was a flash of tail disappearing over a hill. I rode through the gorse to try and flush it, but the dogs were too excited by the whole ordeal to focus. Me too, really.”

“Superior animals.”

“Foxes?”

“Eagles,” Tristan answers, a crooked smile catching one corner of his lips. The dark lines tattooed across his cheeks rise a little, gathering beneath his eyes. “It’s harder to escape when you’re seen from overhead. Did you keep them?”

“Of course,” responds Galahad. “They showed their worth soon enough, and good company besides.” He watches as Tristan gathers whittled strips of wood to toss into the fire, and offers a hand to take the carving he’s been working on. There’s a hesitation, brief, before Tristan passes it to him, fingers brushing rough against Galahad’s palm.

He turns the figure over, a curved head and solid body - a bird, too undefined to be falcon or eagle, but surely one of them. Galahad follows the furrows of wood with his thumb, sliced smooth, not splintered.

“How does she know when it’s time to leave?”

“I take them somewhere far,” Tristan tells him, ruching his falcon’s feathers with gentle strokes against her neck. She ruffles in pleasure at the touch, eyes still closed. “I leave them a gift, in thanks. To feed themselves, after they shared so many hunts with me. A sheep, for the eagles. Probably something smaller for this one.” He sighs, stretching his legs out long with a grimace, muscles tight from days of riding. “And then I don’t call them back.”

Galahad watches him, a man of unerring aim and endless calm, who even in battle walks slowly against his enemies and never once returns injured. He swallows, thinking of how it still must strike him deep to have to let go of something - someone - who for so long has been a companion, a trusted friend.

He runs his thumb over the wooden bird once more and leans forward to pass it back to Tristan.

"When?"

"One more spring," Tristan says, settling back again, one leg pressed back against the log as the other curls before it. "And the months before the second, and I will release her to freedom."

"Just after we're free ourselves," Galahad notes, bringing up a hand to set the side of his thumb between his teeth pensively. "Will you seek another bird, one Temtsel is gone?"

Tristan's lips quirk briefly in pleasure at having her name so properly pronounced, at the young knight making the effort to. He nods.

"I would have my father see I did not forget the art, even being here," he explains, lip curling into his mouth briefly before he swallows and ducks his head to regard the fire. For a long moment he is quiet, the chatter and laughter of the others almost a din after his quiet conversation with Galahad who yet watches him.

"If I ever find him," he adds. "Our home was every mountain peak and snowy outcrop we could reach. I would search all of them and find myself an old man by the end."

"You don't remember?"

"I remember," Tristan considers, brows lifting a little. "But there was no single place for us. It was all ours, and so in summer when the flies would grow thick as fog and the sun exhausted our horses, we moved closer to the mountains, seeking cool. In winters, when the snow came down thick enough to blind us, we went to the plains, spread far and flat, on and on," he says, returning his gaze from distance to the ground before him. "Always somewhere new. We would put up our tents and stay a while, and then move on."

"I'm not sure I could stand it," muses Galahad. "This is bad enough as it is."

"Is it?"

"Compared to a house. A farm. Someplace quiet and familiar, every day."

"I'm not sure I could stand that," Tristan counters, watching as Galahad grins against his folded arms. He feels his own smile widen in response, and turns away. "What was it like?"

Galahad blinks, humming at the question before settling further into the comfortable sprawl against the log behind him.

"We had chores in the morning," he recalls. "Mucking after the horses, brushing and feeding them, feeding the dogs and cleaning their kennel."

"A lot of messy work," Tristan notes, amused, and Galahad laughs.

"A *lot* of messy work," he agrees, tilting his head against his arm as he tries to remember more. Tries to remember those mornings that he had thought himself so contented to forget, that he had thought he wanted gone, entirely, so he could be a man, and free.

He became a man overnight, being taken from home, waking up in panic and worry in a camp that was not his home, a cot that was not his bed, until slowly he adjusted to the temporary, until slowly this became the permanent.

"Got to see the sun rise, though," he adds, soft, "every morning, over the rolling hills."

Tristan makes a small sound, considering, and returns his studious gaze to the man beside him. His words are pensive, voice gentle, as he reminds him, "We still can. At your home or any part of mine. Here or further towards the wall. They're different hills, but it's the same sun."

Galahad blinks, struck silent and warmed, deeply, by the quiet wisdom in the man's words. Tristan sighs, and stretches slowly to stand. Temtsel rises, too, with a shake of sleek feathers, and steps onto the arm offered her, climbing with careful steps to settle on Tristan's shoulder. He ruffles a broad hand through Galahad's hair as he passes by, calling back lightly over his shoulder.

"So you see? It's like you're home already."

End Notes

For more info on Mongolian Eagle Hunters, have a look at some of the links we used: [x] - [x] - [x]

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